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ABSTRACT

Following a costly and destructive fire, Franklin Elementary School in Newark (New Jersey) developed an action plan for reducing violence and vandalism. The plan called for ongoing cooperation between all segments of the school population and of the local, largely Hispanic, community. Security measures were strengthened, but the thrust of the program was the development of a sense of pride, caring, and respect in the school, its people, and the community. This involved the active participation of students, faculty, staff, administrators, parents, and community leaders in discussing the situation and deciding what improvements could be made. Special efforts were made to improve the physical plant, encourage attendance, develop a bilingual/bicultural program, increase parental and community involvement in the school, and help pupils identify their successes on an almost daily basis. This bulletin describes some of the activities undertaken and their results. (Author)

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Technical Assistance Bulletin 34

Franklin School: Vandalism Prevention Through School Pride

Summary

Following a costly and destructive fire, Franklin Elementary School in Newark, New Jersey, developed an action plan for reducing violence and vandalism. The plan called for ongoing cooperation between all segments of the school population and of the local--largely Hispanic--community. Security measures were strengthened, but the thrust of the program was the development of a sense of pride, caring, and respect in the school, its people, and the community. This involved the active participation of students, faculty, staff, administrators, parents, and community leaders in discussing the situation and deciding what improvements could be made. Special efforts were made to improve the physical plant, encourage attendance, develop a bilingual/bicultural program, increase parental and community involvement in the school, and help pupils identify their successes on an almost daily basis. This bulletin describes some of the activities undertaken and their results.

The Problem

In the fall of 1975, 10 classrooms of the Franklin Elementary School in Newark, New Jersey, were destroyed in a $300,000 fire set by young people from the area. The fire symbolized the extent to which the school was suffering--broken windows, graffiti, frequent break-ins and thefts, as well as problems of fighting among students, low teacher morale, and parental apathy were common. Located between a large senior high and a junior high school, the 89 year old, K thru 6 elementary school, was a frequent haunt of drug sellers. Most of the parents of the 1200 pupils had limited facility in English.

The Solution

In 1976, a new principal, Charles P. Mitchell, decided to use a new approach to deal with Franklin Elementary to solve problems--community involvement to build school pride. He began by sending a letter to members of the school and community which summarized the school's situation and asked recipients to attend an open meeting or, if they were unable to attend, to send in their ideas about improving the school environment. More than 150 ideas were submitted to Mitchell, and a committee of administrators, teachers, school staff, parents, students, community leaders, central office security staff, local law enforcement officers, and others was formed to begin work on the school.

The mission of the committee was to study existing problems, develop policy and programs, and perhaps, most significantly, to help implement the plan.

Action Plan

The first step was the development of an action plan to reduce violence and vandalism. An action plan was drafted and included these components: objectives (what do we want to happen?); activities (who will do what, when?); budget (how much will the plan cost to implement and how much money will the plan save the

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school in the long run?); and evaluation (how will we know what the plan accomplishes and why?).

The plan was a starting point. In the four years that it has been in operation, both the physical appearance and social climate of Franklin have altered dramatically to the point where the school motto has spontaneously become: "We're So Proud." School-community cooperation and interaction have radically changed the school to a positive, healthy environment. Specifics of the solution are discussed further.

Security Measures

Because the vulnerability of the building after the fire seemed to invite additional vandalism and break-ins, improving building security was a prime concern. With district and security department support, these actions were taken:

1. Night-time Security Guard

   A night security guard was assigned to Franklin to supplement the daytime guard.

2. Electronic Devices

   The existing public address system was modified electronically so that at night it became an intrusion alarm system.

3. Locks, Doors, Screens

   Old, obsolete, easy-to-force doors and locks were replaced, and heavy screens were installed on lower level windows where needed.

4. Community Involvement

   Residents surrounding the school were asked to report suspicious actions to a security number. Use of the number brought Security Department patrol cars to the scene within minutes. Callers did not have to identify themselves.

5. Community Education

   Use of the school by a broad segment of the community was encouraged. Adult education classes were started. Scouts and other community organizations were invited to meet in the school.

Although improving security was essential, it was regarded as part of a larger plan to reduce vandalism and violence and create a positive environment. The Franklin School members experienced that once necessary hardware and security measures were in place, the strongest deterrents to violence and vandalsim were a demonstration that the parents, staff, students, and community cared about Franklin School.

Improving School Climate

The people at Franklin School, led in particular by principal Mitchell, believed that creating and maintaining positive attitudes in teachers, students, parents, and administrators was a key factor in school success. A number of activities supported an improved school climate.

1. Project Paint

   One of the most successful and unifying activities to improve the entire school/community morale was Project Paint. Over several weekends, parents, community leaders, teachers, students, administrators painted the entire outside of the school from the ground up to 8 feet high using supplies and equipment loaned or donated by other community members and merchants. (Most of the contributions were solicited, by non-school staff who were regular customers of the merchants and approached them on the basis of improving the community and their businesses by improving the school.) The new paint job provided immediate evidence that people cared about Franklin and was a visible indication of their pride.

2. "Good News Bulletins"

   The Franklin committee wanted to highlight positive activities and accomplishments in the school. They began issuing "Good News Bulletins" which highlighted good news about the school. In the bulletins, the following kinds of statistics were issued periodically:

   - 98 percent of the students behaved well on the playground.
   - 98 percent of the students were not in a fight or argument.
   - 25 students gave up recesses or lunch to serve the student body in the cafeteria, on the playground, or in the nurse's office in accordance with contracts they had signed to do these things.

- 15 students volunteered their services to help tutor in a lower grade class during their recess or lunch.
- 60 students participated in an evening sports league.
- 5 students reported and helped to clean up an act of vandalism committed by an unknown person.
- 99 percent of the students were not suspended or expelled.
- 97.5 percent of the students were respectful of staff.
- 99 percent were not involved in any vandalism or stealing.
- 98 percent were not tardy for class.
- 97.5 percent were not issued detentions for misbehavior.

3. Open House Night

Franklin school makes a special effort to encourage parents to attend Open House evenings and over 1100 parents attended last year (pupil population, 1200). The entire school staff is present for the event and parents talk with the teacher, see samples of their child's work, discuss their child's report card and visit other teachers who are working with their child.

Franklin School attributes the success of their Open House to the care that is taken to establish an environment where parents feel welcome and where teachers and staff are willing to provide the parents with something both meaningful and worthwhile. The fact that parents have discussed their child's first report card with the teacher and are then charged with discussing it with their child also serves to involve parents more directly in the child's education for the remainder of the year. This involvement is re-emphasized by the policy of having parents initial homework papers throughout the year, and by an update meeting in the spring and at other times when parents visit the school as they are always welcome to do (including sitting in their child's classes).

4. A Bilingual and Bicultural Education Program

Approximately 85 percent of Franklin Elementary School students are Hispanic, and the majority are Puerto Rican. Franklin began a process of hiring bilingual English- and Spanish-speaking teachers and staff as vacancies occurred throughout the school. The monolingual English- and Spanish-speaking teachers give second language lessons to each other weekly. By using the child's dominant language as the medium of instruction, learning and self-esteem have prospered.

The largely bilingual faculty and staff is one with whom Spanish-speaking parents can easily communicate. Thus, the bilingual/ bicultural program has served as a vehicle to increase community involvement and support.

5. Discipline Committee and Code of Behavior

A discipline committee was formed which involved both school personnel and parents. The committee recommended that each class develop its own code of behavior. Copies of the individual class codes were sent to the committee and then modeled into an overall school code of behavior.

The school code is distributed to each parent at the annual Open House, and the individual class codes are displayed in each classroom and discussed frequently. The codes are reviewed periodically. Currently, for instance, the committee is in the process of adding consistent consequences for repeated misbehaviors.

6. Attendance Procedures

A tremendous emphasis has been placed on attendance, and Franklin has worked hard to make its pupils want to come to school. When the action plan was implemented, their attendance rate was the second lowest in Newark; last year it was close to 90 percent.

In addition to working with parents about the importance of sending their children to school (often they had been

kept out to serve as translators in visits to the doctor or some business appointment), reward systems were instituted that directly involved the children themselves. Members in each class began to take a strong interest in overall class attendance and the class's chance for field trips, cartoon festivals, or other rewards chosen by the class.

Replication Issues

The orientation and approach used to reduce vandalism and violence at Franklin School is particularly suitable for bilingual/bicultural settings where people may be experiencing a loss of pride in themselves and their efforts. Nevertheless, the underlying, consistent tenets of respect and caring and long-term cooperative action tend to bring out the best in any group and to work equally well in any troubled setting.

Required Resources

The resources required to duplicate an effort like that of Franklin Elementary School are not measurable. However, a strong, positive leader--one capable of working with others, and inspiring them--seems necessary.

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